DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 327 742 CG 023 046

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TITLE Divorce and Bar Mitzvah: A First Look.
PUB DATE Aug 90
NOTE 11p.; Paper presented at the Annual Convention of the American Psychological Association (98th, Boston, MA, August 10-14, 1990).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Case Studies; Child Rearing; Conflict Resolution; *Divorce; Family Environment; *Family Involvement; Family Problems; Intervention; Jews; *Judaism; *Parent Counseling; Parent Participation; *Religious Education; Religious Factors
IDENTIFIERS *Bar Mitzvah; *Bat Mitzvah; Rabbis

ABSTRACT

After an introductory discussion and review of literature on divorce among Jewish families, this document presents and analyzes two case studies which show the adverse effect of divorce and child-custody battles on the children of Jewish families who subsequently plan a B'nai Mitzvah (Bar or Bat Mitzvah) ceremony--a joyous ritual of initiation into adulthood and religious life that traditionally calls for the participation of both parents. In the first study, a young girl's Bat Mitzvah is disrupted by a dispute between the mother and father over the seating of the father--either on the pulpit with the mother or with his second wife in the congregation. The outcome of this unresolved conflict is an emotional breakdown during the service by both father and daughter, which irrevocably mars the occasion for the daughter. The second case study, of a son's bar mitzvah involving a divorced couple where the noncustodial father has moved far away and abandoned all support for the mother and son, shows a counterexample of a successful and healing accommodation, owing to the timely mediation of the rabbi, prior to the ceremony. A brief discussion follows, emphasizing the importance of the rabbi's role in recognizing and dealing with reactive unconscious guilt of divorced parents prior to the B'nai Mitzvah ceremonies. (TE)

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DIVORCE AND BAR MITZVAH: A FIRST LOOK

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AMERICAN PSYCHOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION
AT BOSTON, AUGUST 1990

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INTRODUCTION

Current statistics in the United States indicate that almost 50% of first marriages end in divorce. The majority of these (60%) involve children under the age of eighteen. While just less than half of first marriages end in divorce, 55% of second marriages do. This suggests that during the decade of the 1990's, 10% of the children born will experience two divorces with their biological parents before they reach the age of eighteen.

Many authors have documented the potentially painful and devastating consequences of divorce on children. Feelings of abandonment and loss are common among these youngsters. Many have experienced a virtual disappearance of a parent forever. Often these children blame themselves for their parents' divorce. This is most likely to occur when they are the subject of their parents' arguments.

Even worse for these children is being placed in the middle of a custody dispute. Custody battles are usually misguided excuses to carry on the unresolved marital conflicts. Typically parents use the issue of child custody for revenge against each other. Children in custody disputes feel torn apart and pulled in two opposite and mutually exclusive directions. The struggle to keep both parents happy, to take care of them and to avoid hurting them creates an unseemly amount of pressure. In most cases the children love both parents, need them both, and have no intention of losing one or the other. Nevertheless, once the battles begin the parents feed them lies about the other parent, inaccuracies about their legal situation and involve them in the legal battle royal, clearly a place where children do not belong.

There is very limited research on how these trends have affected the North American Jewish Community. As early as 1969, (Joffe) changes were noted in families served by Jewish Social Services. The RC is a 1982 (David) article studying trends among Canadian Jews. Discovered was the decline in the percentage of first marriages among all marriages of Canadian Jews. While this indicated that the divorce rate and remarriage rate was increasing, it did not address the issue of the effects of divorce on children. Cohen (1983) examined the effects of assimilation in the American Culture among Jews. A similar study was done by Pers and Katz

(1984) to see if trends were developing in Israel similar to those in North America. Indeed, they found these same trends in the marriage and divorce rates but they were occurring at a slower pace. A 1986 study by Brodbar-Nemzer examined the issue of divorce and Jewish commitment. Discovered was that a pre-existing group (religious) commitment was related to marital stability. However, none of the effects of divorce were really examined.

Perhaps the most significant psychological research on the effects of Jewish children and the B'Nai Mitzvah process was performed by Marciano in 1982. She looked at the role of "phantom" triads, phantom referring to the absent father following a divorce. Marciano studied the psychodynamics and family coalitions after divorce and how this affected the religious observance. She interviewed thirteen families. In all cases the Jewish mother had retained custody following the divorce. She found that as the B'Nai Mitzvah approached, the children were likely to disagree with the wishes of the custodial parent and form a coalition with the phantom non-custodial father whose ideas about the B'Nai Mitzvah ritual did not coincide with the mother's. In some cases, it was noted that the mother coalesced with the B'Nai Mitzvah child against the phantom father.

The Jewish literature is remarkably void of material on divorce and B'Nai Mitzvah. Two articles by Sanford Seltzer, Chairman of the Jewish Community provided the only reflections found on the subject. In 1980, he noted that for the divorced family the B'Nai Mitzvah event may be dreaded not anticipated happily. He sighted the awakening of sad memories, confronting former in-laws and reliving those accusations of blame for the marital dissolution as the causes. In his 1986 writing he elaborates. Past memories awakened were described as including one or both partners having grown up in the congregation, the couple being married in the Temple and perhaps even the B'Nai Mitzvah child being blessed at birth by the Rabbi as the parents stood before the Ark. These were the pleasant memories B'Nai Mitzvah evokes. Not so pleasant is the fear of nasty comments from former in-laws and friends of the former marital partner. Seltzer also pointed out the conflicts between the former couple over levels of participation in the ceremony. This battle becomes magnified if one or the other tries to involve their new mate, the B'Nai Mitzvah's step-parent. He accurately described the potential for the parents to use the

B'Nai Mitzvah as a weapon against each other oblivious of the psychological damage to the child, damage that can alienate the child from anything religious.

It is the paucity of the literature and the authors own personal experiences that has lead to the idea to examine more closely the effects of divorce on the B'Nai Mitzvah. Obviously in those cases where two divorced parents are cooperative there is no need for

concern. It is the difficult and tragic cases where the parents are unable to put aside their conflicts that result in the ruination of the B'Nai Mitzvah experience of the Jewish child.

CASE: 1 SALLY

Mother and father were married for ten years. They had one child, Sally, born in 1965. Each subsequently remarried. Father's second wife had a son. Mother's second husband had never been married previously. Mom and step-dad had 1 son together. Mother and father lived in different cities, 80 miles apart.

Sally's Bat Mitzvah was scheduled at her's mother's synagogue with a party to follow the services. Everyone would be invited. Mother, as custodial parent, wanted only herself and her ex-husband to be seated on the pulpit because she was currently having extreme marital difficulties, that included tensions between Sally & her step-dad. All four adults would participate in the actual Bat Mitzvah ritual. Each biological parent would have reading parts and would share public words of encouragement.

However, father disagreed. He insisted that his wife and step-son be seated with him on the pulpit. He also scheduled a party in his city the evening after the Bat Mitzvah to which his ex-wife and her family would not be invited. He declined an offer to jointly host an afternoon party with his ex-wife.

When told by the rabbi that none of the step-family could be seated on the pulpit as a matter of synagogue policy, father adamantly objected. He threatened to sit in the congregation with his wife. The rabbi asked him several times to reconsider, always mentioning his compassion for the difficult position of a non-custodial parent at a child's Bar or Bat Mitzvah. The rabbi made himself easily available for further conversations and advised father that he did not need to make a final decision until the actual beginning of services. Father wholeheartedly thanked the rabbi and promised to postpone any final decision until the last possible moment.
On the night before the Bat Mitzvah, father said that he would not sit separately from his wife even if it meant not sitting with Sally. Sally was hurt by her father's choice and told him so. angrily and repeatedly, the week prior to the Bat Mitzvah.

During the ceremony, there were no problems as the customs, rituals and prayers were conducted. However, during his words of love and encouragement to Sally, father (who was normally a strong willed, emotionally controlled public person) suddenly broke down and sobbed profusely. Sally also broke down and began sobbing. The thirteen year old was so shaken that the rabbi had to hold her hand throughout the remainder of the Bat Mitzvah presentation.

ANALYSIS

Although the B'Nai Mitzvah is a joyous celebration of a religious accomplishment, it is nevertheless under the best of circumstances a time of increased tension, anxiety and stress. The completion of preparation of the B'Nai Mitzvah child culminating in a unique and extensive solo performance in front of everyone dear to the family creates the type of performance pressure known to every virtuoso. The arrival and sometimes lengthy visits from out of town family and friends keeps the family center stage as host and hostesses for an extended period of time. In many communities the parties which follow the B'Nai Mitzvah have become gala events rivaling weddings in their lavishness. If all three of the above are successfully accomplished the B'Nai Mitzvah becomes a peak experience for the child and the family. In case number 1, conflict erupted associated with the religious ceremony. Psychologically, the parents were clearly unable to put aside their need to show all involved that they were united. In trying to force the image of their union and assert their place they ignored Sally and her needs. Instead it was as if father was showing off to his ex-wife, her friends and family that he was able to be successfully married. This approach was evident in his concerns about seating, participation in the ceremony and in having separate parties. He carried out this effort with total disregard for Sally and the dynamics that had most likely been occurring for quite some time. It is easy to speculate that this had been his posture since the divorce and remarriage and may even have been his style before the divorce. He was unwilling to sublimate his needs for the needs of his daughter.

Reactive unconscious guilt had been present for quite some time. It appears that it finally reached a conscious level when he broke down during the service. At that time it is easy to imagine that his tears were out of guilt for his years of disregard for Sally's needs. Unfortunately father's timing was very poor. Not only did his tears temporarily interrupt the services, but the more important consequence was the effect of his emotional outburst on Sally. It was a moment for her to remember for the rest of her life, hopefully as her accomplishment of a major milestone.

Instead she was left with her father's needs once again coming before her own. Sally will not be able to recall her successful reading of her Torah portion. Instead that has become secondary to her father's emotional reaction and ultimately her own.

What can prevent this? Obviously it doesn't require a psychologist to recognize the seriousness of the continuing conflicts and hostilities. Could a Rabbi diffuse this with an out of town congregant in the short time he had prior to the Bar Mitzvah? Probably not. Certainly the plans for two separate parties were in place long before the Rabbi had the opportunity to intervene. This added to tension for Sally putting her in the middle trying

to please both parents. However, the emotional outburst caused by father's reactive unconscious guilt becoming conscious may have been prevented. There were some warning signs.

Obvious was the intensity of the battle over who was to participate. Identifying father's needs to show everyone his "more perfect union" and more importantly identifying that this need of his was overriding his daughter's needs was the key. Pointing out to him Sally's need and the importance of the day being her day may have helped. It also could have been a time for the Rabbi to suggest a referral to a psychologist for some brief crisis intervention focused on how to adequately handle these issues being stirred up by the Bat Mitzvah. Finally, the opportunity to share words of encouragement must be examined. This gave father the opportunity to make the Bat Mitzvah his show rather than Sally's. It is in these times that the Rabbi may need to play a more proactive role rather than allowing a parent free reign to say whatever they wish. Guidance from the Rabbi as to the direction and focus of those words and encouragements, reminders to the parents of what they need to do to be helpful to their child on her day and pointing out to them the potential emotional reactions from the child and the potential consequences of those emotions may all serve to prevent what occurred during Sally's Bat Mitzvah.

Finally, many psychologists would say that the emotional expression that occurred was a positive, healthy and healing reaction for all involved. However, the emotional outburst did not have to occur in public. Second, the emotional outburst served as an interference in a significant religious ritual and greatly hampered Sally's performance during that ritual. Third, for the emotional outburst to truly be healthy and healing it needed to be processed. If that emotional outburst had occurred in therapy both parties would have been given the opportunity to express their emotions and then to discuss their meaning. Instead, there was no discussion whatsoever of the emotional reactions, the service had to continue and for Sally to complete her Bat Mitzvah she had to regain her composure. The opportunity to truly dialogue about those feelings was totally missed and the potential gain from the expression of those feelings was lost.

In a situation like this, the Rabbi has numerous concerns to face. First of all the Rabbi must be concerned for his congregants. Second, the Rabbi must take on a protective role for the Bat Mitzvah child. There is also responsibility to make sure that Shabat services get completed and finally the Rabbi has to manage the situation so the Bar Mitzvah can be accomplished.

CASE: 2 MARK

Mark's parents divorced after they were married 16 years and neither remarried. They had two sons. Subsequent to the divorce father moved to a city 2,500 miles away. After 2 years he never

visited his sons and defaulted on all subsequent support payments. He maintained semi-annual telephone contact with the boys but did not attend the older son's Bar Mitzvah.

Mark's Bar Mitzvah was scheduled 11 years after the divorce. Mother had full responsibility for all preparations, celebrations, and costs. Two months prior to the Bar Mitzvah father decided to attend. Mark wanted his father to attend and participate but he did not want to hurt his mother's feelings. Mother did not want her ex-husband to participate in any fashion.

The rabbi met privately with mother and told her how much he sympathized with her feelings. He also told her how concerned he was for Mark's welfare. The rabbi recommended a service structure whereby mother would have the primary participation, father would have secondary participation, but both would sit on the pulpit. The rabbi also told mother that her boys loved her deeply and would love her even more by acceding to Mark's request.

During the ceremony and the celebration there were no unusual situations. Father was grateful to be with his sons and to participate in a meaningful way. Mother was pleased that her parental role was reaffirmed by making her the primary participant. Throughout the day everyone remarked how gracious and admirable she appeared despite the difficulty of father's presence. Each parent acknowledged the other's good intentions. Mark and his brother were pleased to spend time with their father. They acknowledged their mother's loving kindness with repeated kisses, hugs, and words.

The Bar Mitzvah brought Mark closer to each of his parents and to his brother. The anger of the mother and the guilt of the father were noticeably reduced and remained that way over the year.

ANALYSIS

It is clear that the reason father attended his son's Bar Mitzvah was years of reactive unconscious guilt which finally became conscious. The reactive unconscious guilt led him to decide to finally renew a relationship with his son and to be a part of this significant moment in his life. Most likely the guilt had not reached a conscious level at the time of his older son's Bar Mitzvah, thus his absence at that time.

A potentially explosive situation never did explode. The main reason is the delicate intervention in the part of the rabbi. His empathy and support helped mother put the entire situation in perspective. She thus became exceptional in her ability to put aside what must have been years of anger and resentment. Not only had her husband left her, but he left his children forcing her to

become more than just a single parent. She had to virtually become the only parent. In addition, when he left geographically and emotionally he also left financially. This also included leaving her the great financial expense of preparing the celebration following the Bar Mitzvah. When father motivated by his reactive unconscious guilt decided to become involved again, mother could easily have used this as her moment to get even with him and deny him the opportunity. Instead, out of great caring for her children she put aside those reactions and accepted his attendance. Another potential explosive in this situation also did not occur. Father did not try to suddenly come onto the scene and take over as the father. Instead, he just wanted a role, not to be the boss. After years of reactive unconscious guilt, it would not have been surprising if he had tried to overcompensate and to make up for all those years by becoming "Superman" for one major event in his son's life. If that had been his attempt, it may have pushed his ex-wife over the edge and resulted in explosion. Fortunately that was not his approach.

The "phantom" parent as described in Marciano's article really did appear in this case. Mark really did not know his father. There had been basically two phone calls a year. Again, as commonly occurs in divorce situations he probably maintained fantasies in his mind of what his father was like and curiosity too. He wanted to know his father to know what he was like and to have his father involved in his life. Wallerstein and Kelly (1980) point out that in situations of divorce, when children reach their teenage years and have only lived with one parent they are very often curious what life would be like if they were living with the other parent. Mark's curiosity about his father could be somewhat fulfilled by his attendance and participation in the Bar Mitzvah without having to live with him. Further, if his mother had resisted and not allowed father to become involved, this most likely would have heightened the son's curiosity about his father and resulted in mother being the "bad person" for not allowing father to participate. All of her years of single parenting would have immediately been overlooked by the son because she was treating his father so poorly. In essence it would have made father the hero, mother the enemy. Fortunately this did not occur because mother handled it so well.

In addition, in divorce situations children almost always hang on to the ultimate wish that their parents will reconcile. While reconciliation was not to occur, the Bar Mitzvah boy could ultimately view himself as the hero because in his eyes it was his Bar Mitzvah that brought his father back on the scene and at least and got his mother and father talking and participating again on his behalf.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

There is no parallel to the B'nai Mitzvah (Bar & Bat Mitzvah) ritual in any other religious community. For many non-Jews it is impossible to fully understand the pressures upon a thirteen year-old or the feelings which envelope the parents. The B'nai Mitzvah for children of divorce simultaneously place the pressures of both the religious ritual and the separated family upon the child. Parents certainly have their own needs but at this lifecycle event they must sublimate their needs for the child's.

Reactive unconscious guilt will almost always occur at these ceremonies but its impact can be reduced by greater self-awareness, heightened communication and thoughtful planning. For their part, rabbis, cantors and educators must make parents aware at least six months prior to the ceremony, of the typical emotional situations faced by children of divorce and their parents.

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